

## CHAPTER II THE ENLIGHTENMENT'S CRITIQUE OF TRADITION

Suspicion of the authority of tradition is the very signature of the Age of Reason, and particularly, of the Enlightenment. In the last chapter we saw how the suspicion to which tradition was subjected led to a profound misunderstanding of its very nature. If tradition is not merely doctrines or beliefs transmitted from the past, but the very context in which they are interpreted, then the effort to subordinate tradition to reason will necessarily diminish the understanding of tradition. A part of tradition, that aspect of it which can be deliberately examined, will take the place of the whole. The dimension of tradition which operates in an unconscious and pre-conscious way will be consigned to the realm of prejudice. It is pre-judgmental in that it comprises ingrained ways of thought which, many would say, need to be fully illumined by reason if they are not to hinder the search for truth.

This is the heritage of the Enlightenment, which will be the topic of this chapter. According to the pessimistic assessment of the Enlightenment, tradition (and the prejudices which accrue to it) have obscured the true nature of things. The thinkers of this age set for themselves the task of enlightening what had, up until their time, remained in darkness. Their chief tool would be the human reason. This reason, however, is not viewed by the eighteenth century in a communal sense, as a common heritage which binds a society together by a general agreement about what is reasonable. No one inherits reason, this age proclaimed, and God has not planted it as an innate idea in the human mind. For in the Enlightenment, as Ernst Cassirer has written, "Reason is now looked upon rather as an acquisition than as a heritage."<sup>1</sup> It is acquired by the individual who breaks with the prevailing ideas, who refuses to believe on the evidence of tradition. Instead of relying on merely human opinions, the one who is enlightened uses reason to plunge to the source of truth, as it were, wresting nature's secrets from nature. The philosopher who expressed this scientific program as a comprehensive theory was Francis Bacon, Baron of Verulam.

### II.1. Bacon and the Selectivity of Experience

Bacon, who lived between 1561 and 1626, does not belong, properly speaking, to the Enlightenment. That period is confined to the eighteenth century, and Bacon should be situated instead within the Age of Reason, which encompasses both the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. But he was certainly the Enlightenment's precursor, and prepared for its thinkers the scientific method as an investigative tool, honing it, at least in its theoretical aspect, to a bright edge. Paul Hazard called him "le génie expérimental

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<sup>1</sup> "Die Vernunft ist weit weniger ein solcher Besitz [i.e., "ein Inbegriff 'eingeborener Ideen'"], als sie eine bestimmte Form des Erwerbs ist." Ernst Cassirer, Die Philosophie der Aufklärung (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1932), pp. 15-16. The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, trans. Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 13.

en personne.”<sup>2</sup> Bacon’s importance for the investigation of tradition lies in his insight into the selectivity of experience. He saw that the human mind does not receive impressions in an unmediated or objective way, but shapes experience by taking it up into thought. The human mind, formed by language, society, and tradition, shapes in turn what it receives. In doing so, however, it risks blinding itself to the objects it studies. This was Bacon’s criticism of tradition: the traditions which shape thought can also obscure it.

### II.1.A. The Doctrine of Idols

Bacon’s Novum Organum (1620) was conceived as the *instauratio magna*, the great restoration or renewal of the sciences. It states that idols and false notions now possess the human understanding, and that these must be cleared away in order that the business of knowledge can be commenced anew by means of an experimental method.<sup>3</sup> Bacon secured this point in his doctrine of the idols. This doctrine, expounded in sections 38-68 of the Novum Organum’s first book of aphorisms, exposes the shortcomings of that naive consciousness which holds that the world, without help from the concepts by which it is understood, makes perfect sense. There are four classes of idols: the idols of the tribe (*idola tribus*), of the cave (*idola cavi*), of the forum of marketplace (*idola fori*), and of the theater (*idola theatri*). The idols of the tribe arise from that prejudice of human nature which tends to make the individual the measure of things. The human tribe makes itself an idol, in a sense, because it takes as true its own understanding of a thing, rather than the thing itself. The idols of the cave are of the same species, but on an individual level. Bacon alludes here to the image of the cave in Plato’s Republic. He means not only that the individual understands a representation of things (rather than the things themselves), but also that, since everyone has his or her own cave, everyone’s understanding of the representation of reality is colored by individual peculiarities and preconceptions. The idols of the forum are the words in which human beings have discourse. Unfit words betray the understanding by leading it to mistake their imprecise import for truth. And lastly, the idols of the theater are philosophies and systems of thought. Like theatrical productions, they mimic reality, and shape the

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Hazard, La Pensée Européenne au XVIIIème Siecle: De Montesquieu à Lessing (Paris: Boivin & Cie, 1946), Part II, chapter ii, p. 176. European Thought in the Eighteenth Century: From Montesquieu to Lessing, trans. J. Lewis May (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Bacon, Novum Organum, in The Works of Francis Bacon, collected and edited by James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (London: Longmans & Co., et al., 1857), vol. I: Philosophical Works I. Bacon announces his program in a complete way in the preface to the Novum Organum. He asserts the superiority of experience and experiment in Book I, section 70. Translation: The Works of Francis Bacon, popular edition, based on the complete edition of Spedding, Ellis, and Heath (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1878). The New Organon is found in vol. I of this two-volume edition: Philosophical Writings.

understanding which might do better without them. The doctrine of idols, taken as a whole, unmask the institutions and faculties which mediate the truths of nature.

Of particular interest is the first class of idols, the idols of the tribe. These idols of human nature (as distinct from the nature of the universe) draw the mind to look for the solution to scientific problems in the ultimate causes of speculative metaphysics. These intuitions are, in a sense, closer to the human being than exact observation, for one need not perform rigorous experiments to hazard a metaphysical guess. Even when one does perform experiments, the results are skewed according to the experimenter's presuppositions. Thus Bacon can assert that "the human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolours the nature of thing by mingling its own nature with it."<sup>4</sup> Bacon's image of the mirror, or *speculum*, anticipates the importance of speculative thought in the understanding of tradition: one never simply appropriates tradition, but instead reflects it, learning not only about the past but also about one's own relation to it. Between the past and oneself a dialectic takes place. Like the play of light in a mirror, the mind engages in action, asking itself to what extent it sees what really is and to what extent it sees what the mind itself has projected.<sup>5</sup> The doctrine of the idols begins to suggest that the truth of what is self-evidently true is mediated by that which is not self-evident, the forms of human understanding.

Bacon drew from this a consequence which is important for the present investigation. Instead of portraying the human admixture in every observation as that which hinders experience and true induction, he sought the proper balance in science between an objective, experimental method and the human spirit. This is the point at which Gadamer applauds Bacon:

The required method Bacon himself describes as experimental. But it must be remembered that by 'experiment' Bacon does not always just mean the scientist's technical procedure of artificially inducing processes in isolating conditions and making them capable of being measured. An experiment is also, and primarily, the careful directing of our mind, preventing it from indulging in overhasty generalisations, consciously confronting it with the most remote and apparently

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<sup>4</sup> "Estque intellectus humanus instar speculi inaequalis ad radios rerum, qui suam naturam naturae rerum immiscet, eam distorquet et inficit." *Novum Organum*, 1.41.

<sup>5</sup> Jankowitz makes this same point in relation to the idols of the forum, that is, to language. Language mediates between consciousness (the mind which projects) and being (that which is). Bacon saw that language sets itself up against the speaker's autonomy, says Jankowitz, and one never knows whether language is being used or whether language is performing one's thought:

"Die Sprache als Mittleres zwischen Bewusstsein und Sein, deren Bedeutung als Vorurteilsstruktur Bacon nicht erkennt, tritt als sich verselbständigende Macht dem Benutzer gegenüber" (*Philosophie und Vorurteil*, p. 20).

most diverse instances, so that it may learn, in a gradual and continuous way, to work, via the process of exclusion, towards the axioms.<sup>6</sup>

The human spirit, that which has been shaped in a tradition and which passes it on, enables science, in a word, to progress. It does so by refusing to be satisfied with a single experiment, or even a set of experiments. Rather, it recalls past observations, confronts them with the data of the present, and mediates between them in memory.<sup>7</sup> In this concept of memory, Bacon shows most clearly how experiments progress by virtue of the personal and attentive decisions of the scientist, rather than impersonally and mechanically. Science is never a matter of pure objectivity, but always includes the participation of the human spirit.

### II.1.B. Interpretation, Not Anticipation, of Nature

So we can see that Bacon's research into understanding did, after a fashion, broaden our knowledge of tradition, at least in the sense of the received opinions and language which shape the work of science. The selectivity of the human spirit and of memory makes the role of tradition manifest. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that, for Bacon, language and human opinion are idols, and the one who accepts them uncritically is an idolater. Despite Bacon's insight into the shortcomings of experience as the basis for true knowledge – the philosopher readily concedes that the mind tends to leap from a first conclusion to a general axiom<sup>8</sup> – he still begins, when he formulates his

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<sup>6</sup> “Die Methode, die Bacon fordert, nennt er selbst eine experimentelle. Dabei ist aber zu bedenken, dass das Experiment bei Bacon nicht immer nur die technische Veranstaltung des Naturforschers meint, der unter isolierenden Bedingungen Abläufe künstlich herbeiführt und messbar macht. Experiment ist vielmehr auch und vor allem die kunstvolle Leitung unseres Geistes, der verhindert wird, sich voreiligen Verallgemeinerungen zu überlassen, und der bewusst die Beobachtungen, die er an der Natur anstellt, zu variieren, bewusst die entlegensten, scheinbar am meisten voneinander abstehenden Fälle zu konfrontieren, und so schrittweise und kontinuierlich auf dem Wege eines Ausschließungsverfahrens zu den Axiomata zu gelangen lernt.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 331 (translation: p. 312). The English states that the experiment confronts the mind with diverse instances. The German, however, explicitly states that the mind or human spirit itself performs this office.

<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Paolo Rossi presents Bacon as anything but the foe of tradition. He offers abundant evidence of Bacon's adaptation of fifteenth-century rhetorical and philosophic mnemonics for the purposes of experimental science. The memory, according to the Baconian use of rhetoric, enables one to recall appropriate examples for the sake of scientific discourse; and this discourse, which allows scientists to share and pass on what they know, is what Rossi calls the “method of tradition.” Paolo Rossi, *Francesco Bacone: dalla magia alla scienza* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 1957), chapter 5. *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> Bacon, *Novum Organum*, I.47.

own program, with sense perception.<sup>9</sup> The program is called the interpretation of nature, as distinguished from anticipations of nature. Anticipations of nature are a spurious way of discovering truth which, though they may start with sense perception, quickly fly to the most general axioms. They mislead the investigator who tries mistakenly to deduce from the anticipated axioms the middle steps.<sup>10</sup> The interpretation of nature, by contrast, not only begins with the senses, but proceeds gradually to ever-more-complicated inductions, never losing its empirical basis.<sup>11</sup> This reliance upon sense perception would, Bacon believed, protect the mind from the idols of previous opinion and the language of the market-place. It would free humanity from the past which constrains it. To this extent, Bacon's philosophy can be described as a moment in the decline of tradition.

To be sure, Bacon was not unwilling to honor the ancients. Although he termed Plato's natural theology and Aristotle's logic the corrupters of natural philosophy,<sup>12</sup> and although he had similar unkind things to say about the greatest part of the classical tradition,<sup>13</sup> he nevertheless claimed that his great instauration was not a rival to what had gone before. It was, on the contrary, a new road for the understanding, untried by all preceding philosophers. His interpretation *of* nature cannot even be judged by those who practice the method of anticipation of nature, Bacon wrote, because one need not "abide by the sentence of a tribunal which is itself on trial."<sup>14</sup> Only by its fruits shall his method be known. Yet his stubbornness hints at a problem which Bacon never treated, a problem which is the consequence of his attempt to break with tradition. It is the problem of criteria: how can one erect a logical criterion for the approach to truth when the truth of the criterion itself is at issue? When there are no established criteria, or when the established criteria are being judged, what measure does one use to judge them? Bacon suggests that the results of the application of his method of the interpretation of nature will themselves provide a criterion. But those results, he fails to add, have in turn to be evaluated. In the absence of a particular set of criteria, the results must be judged by the general norms of plausibility – norms which have been transmitted in a tradition. Bacon cannot see this dilemma, and so misses one of tradition's important dimensions.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., "Preface."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., I.19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., I.26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., I.96.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., I.71.

<sup>14</sup> "[Q]uia non postulandum est ut ejus rei iudicio stetur, quae ipsa in iudicium vocatur." Ibid., I.33.

The dilemma was not apparent because Bacon had offered what he considered to be a provisional criterion, a kind of wait-and-see stance. Apply the method, he says, and its value will be self-evident. But the problem continually arises as to how one can evaluate anything when no given and traditional norms suffice. René Descartes faced the same problem. He shared with Bacon an enthusiasm for the inductive method – indeed, Bacon’s emphasis on a gradual and unbroken interpretive ascent<sup>15</sup> recalls the very language of Descartes’ Regulae<sup>16</sup> – and he indirectly revealed, even more than his English forerunner, the perplexities of a philosophy which aims at formulating, without reference to tradition, true criteria for the truth.

## II.2. The Conflict of Authority and Reason in Descartes

The dates of Descartes’ life, 1596-1650, place him with Bacon in the Age of Reason. Descartes was acquainted with Bacon’s thought, referring to him on at least two occasions in the correspondence with Marin Mersenne by Bacon’s title, “Verulamius.”<sup>17</sup> In one sense, the French and the English philosophers were colleagues, working at a common task. Both emphasized experience and an experimental, scientific methodology, a mechanistic hypothesis about nature, and the necessity of progressing gradually from the study of simple to more complex natures.<sup>18</sup> But in another sense, their relationship was that of master and pupil. Descartes was the first to systematically pursue Bacon’s goal of a self-purification from prejudice.<sup>19</sup> The doctrine of the idols was doubtless congenial to the Frenchman, who claimed to have emancipated himself from the idolatry of the schools and of custom.<sup>20</sup> It would be easy to draw the conclusion that the work of Descartes is of no significance for the study of tradition, other than as a point on the chart of its decline.

Yet this would be something of an injustice, and on two counts. First, Descartes’ central concern was the most traditional of philosophic topics, metaphysics. By it he meant the principles of knowledge, the attributes of God, and the multiple natures of the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., I.19.

<sup>16</sup> Descartes, Regulae ad directionem ingenii, in Oeuvres, vol. x, p. 369. Rules for the Direction of the Mind, in Philosophical Essays, p. 155.

<sup>17</sup> See the letters of January 1630 and of May 10, 1632. Descartes, Oeuvres, vol. I: Correspondance (Avril 1622 - Février 1638), pp. 109 and 251.

<sup>18</sup> Stanley Victor Keeling, Descartes, 2nd ed. (London, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> Jankowitz, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Discours de la méthode, in Oeuvres, vol. VI, pp. 511 (French) and pp. 542-545 (Latin). Translation: in Philosophical Essays, pp. 59. See also the Regulae, in Oeuvres, vol. x, pp. 363-364 (translation in Philosophical Essays, pp. 150-151).

human mind.<sup>21</sup> Descartes sought a renewal of metaphysics, and so broke with one aspect of the philosophic tradition. But, as we shall see, his concerns were far from unrelated to the traditional questions of that discipline. The second reason why Descartes is of interest to the study of tradition lies in his concept of mathematics. He regarded this science not merely as the symbolism and relationship of numbers for the purpose of solving quantitative problems, but rather in its ancient sense, as a general science of learning or knowledge. Plato, for example, speaks of mathematics as a broad term for branches of learning such as reckoning, measuring and astronomy (Laches 182B). In his Symposium (211C), he speaks of mathematics as the “beautiful learning” (καλα μαθηματα) which is one of the rungs of the ladder to the beautiful itself. Mathematics bears the ancient weight of a comprehensive theory of knowledge, and it is to this theory that Descartes devotes considerable attention.

### II.2.A. The Unity of Mathematics and Metaphysics

In his Regulae, written perhaps in 1628 and published posthumously, Descartes distinguishes between the particular disciplines of arithmetic and geometry, on the one hand, and mathematics in general, on the other. “There must be a certain general science which explains everything which can be asked about order and measure,” he writes, “and which is concerned with no particular subject matter.” This general science is called “mathesis universalis,” he adds, “not by an arbitrary appellation, but by a usage which is already accepted and of long standing.”<sup>22</sup> Tradition, that which has given the name and the practice, justifies Descartes’ broad conception of universal mathematics. This discipline cannot be limited to the natural or exact sciences, but takes its warrant from history for the widest variety of applications. If something can be asked in terms of order and measure, then mathematics can explain it. Descartes saw that mathematical reasoning could be “extended to any sort of subject matter whatever,” as S. V. Keeling notes, “provided only that the ultimate characteristics or ‘natures’ composing it would be severally conceived, clearly and distinctly.”<sup>23</sup> It is the universal science, encompassing all other fields of inquiry.

To be sure, it is worth noting that Descartes excepted the moral law from his task of applying mathematical reasoning to every field and thus grounding anew all human

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<sup>21</sup> Keeling (p. 58) quotes Descartes’ letter to the translator of his Principia philosophiae, the Abbé Claude Picot, a letter which became the preface to the French edition: Principes: Traduction Française in Oeuvres, vol. IX-2, p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> “[A]c proinde generalem quamdam esse debere scientiam, quae id omne explicet, quod circa ordinem & mensuram nulli speciali materiae addictam quaeri potest, eademque, non ascitio vocabulo, sed jam inveterato atque usu recepto, Mathesim universalem nominari. . . .” Descartes, Regulae, in Oeuvres, 10.378 (Philosophical Essays, p. 161).

<sup>23</sup> Keeling, pp. 45-46.

knowledge.<sup>24</sup> He was prepared to accept the Stoic idea of right and Roman law, deducing from them his moral principle, rather than attempting to induce it from an historical examination of custom and institutions.<sup>25</sup> But, despite this exception, his idea of mathematics sought to be all inclusive. It was Descartes who, before Leibniz, developed the idea of a mathematical sign language of reason in which all philosophy would be contained.<sup>26</sup> Such a sign language would encompass the entire philosophic tradition. That is to say, it would, in one sense, represent the tradition (serving as its symbol system) and, in another sense, it would replace it (because the language would assume tradition's role). Descartes, it must be said, never carried out this program. But the applications he saw for mathematical reasoning were unbounded.

They extended particularly to metaphysics. Descartes sought to renew this discipline by systematically doubting everything which could not be grasped in or deduced from an intuition whose model was the clarity and distinctness of mathematics.<sup>27</sup> The method of systematic doubt expounded in the Meditationes can be called antecedent, rather than consequent, because it attempts to doubt from the start, that is, before anything is accepted. Instead of positing something as true and then subjecting it to doubt, Descartes doubts in order to clear his mind of preconceived ideas. He aims at a total emancipation from tradition. Yet it is with that most traditional of metaphysical questions – of what am I certain? – that he begins. For Descartes, this is metaphysics at its most fundamental. Because he systematically doubts the evidence of his senses, he seeks an answer which is literally metaphysical, in other words, beyond the evidence which the senses provide. The well known conclusion of his method of doubt, the certainty that he thinks (regardless of the correctness of his thoughts), is due to an intuition which apparently meets every wished for criterion of clarity and distinctness. Just as a mathematical theorem is clear and distinct, so too, apparently, is the proposition *cogito ergo sum*. Descartes' certainty, in which a broadly mathematical knowledge is

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<sup>24</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 262 (translation: p. 248), draws attention to Descartes' letters of July 21, August 4 and 18, 1645, to Princess Elisabeth of Sweden, in which he comments on Seneca's De vita beata and recommends it to her as an aid to acquiring philosophic happiness.

<sup>25</sup> Keeling, p. 46. It remained for Arnold Geulinx of Anvers (1624-1669), the disciple of Descartes who wrote Γνωθι σεαυτου, sive ethica (1696), to apply Descartes' system to ethical matters.

<sup>26</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 393 (translation: p. 376 fn.), cites Descartes' letter to Mersenne of November 20, 1629, in which this idea is proposed, and links it to the Platonic idea of the creation of the world as the reckoning of God.

<sup>27</sup> Descartes defines his concepts of intuition and deduction in the third of the Regulae. He summarizes his method most succinctly in four stages in the Discours de la methode, in the Oeuvres, 10.550 (Latin) and pp. 18-19 (French). Translation in Philosophical Essays, p. 15.

united with metaphysics, placed metaphysics and the concept of mathematics in a new light.<sup>28</sup> The French philosopher showed how the traditional questions of metaphysics might be brought into conjunction with the empiricism and mathematical rigor of science.

### II.2.B. The Limits of Systematic Doubt

This positive contribution of Descartes, however, cannot be allowed to conceal the impoverished concept of tradition which underlies his method. This poverty reveals itself most clearly when we examine the unyielding opposition he erects between authority and reason, and his unwillingness to question the capacity of systematic doubt to free itself from tradition. Descartes believed that his capacity to doubt was an absolute one. There is nothing in what he formerly believed to be true, he writes in the first meditation, that he cannot somehow doubt. This suggests a kind of unlimited intellectual freedom: no matter how one is constrained within a body, the mind remains free to think what it will, ultimately rejecting what is false and accepting only what one clearly and distinctly intuits. Descartes assumed, as L. J. Beck has written, that one could separate oneself from the totality of one's convictions, ideas, and values, in order to examine them.<sup>29</sup> From this separate and independent position, all things could be scrutinized and correctly assessed. The implication is that one's own tradition, like one's beliefs, can be fully brought to mind and subjected to doubt.

But does this ideal of intellectual freedom accord with what we have seen to be the limits which tradition presents to thought? Does it account for the constraints of language and culture, for example, which place definite grammatical borders upon the human ability to conceptualize and to articulate, and which provide humanity with symbols and concepts in only a finite number? Jankowitz, in his exposition of what he takes to be the unexpressed prejudices of Descartes, offers to these questions a persuasive denial. He begins with an analysis of doubt. The systematic doubt of Descartes, he argues, is not radical enough, because it never doubts the ability of language to articulate reality. To be sure, the correctness of a sentence was for Descartes always an issue. But the intelligibility of the sentence itself was never doubted. The fundamental prejudice of the French philosopher was a prejudice in favor of the functional thought of language, writes Jankowitz, a kind of thought within whose "grammar" such categories as extension, existence, and cognition make sense.<sup>30</sup> These categories are taken over from a linguistic tradition. One may claim to doubt everything, certainly, but such a claim draws one into a paradox. If everything is subjected to doubt, then there is nothing left to be

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<sup>28</sup> This is the positive estimate of Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 436 (translation: p. 417). He defines the task which Descartes presented to the Enlightenment as the unification of the new physical sciences with the philosophy inherited from the Greek tradition.

<sup>29</sup> L. J. Beck, *The Metaphysics of Descartes: A Study of the Meditations* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 88.

<sup>30</sup> Jankowitz, p. 27.

doubted. This absence becomes the doubter's first certainty: the certainty that everything has been doubted. The paradox consists in the fact that this certainty itself is not doubted.<sup>31</sup> One is drawn to the conclusion that radical and systematic doubt is a logical impossibility. The act of expressing doubt demands an implicit faith in the language of doubt, the language offered by tradition, sealed by practice, and accepted as self-evidently expressive. A truly radical doubt cannot be shared because it is speechless.<sup>32</sup>

Descartes, we can see, was caught up in the problem (hinted at in the end of our discussion of Bacon) of formulating true criteria for the truth. This is a problem because in it one encounters the limits to the Enlightenment's concept of limitless mental freedom, limits erected by tradition. Tradition shapes human beings in such a way that they accept certain things as self-evidently true. And, according to Jankowitz' analysis, it is a characteristic of the self evident that one does not doubt it – otherwise, it would not be self evident, but doubtful. Descartes formulates a criterion for the truth, the criterion of clear and distinct intuition and gradual, step-by-step deduction. What he does not observe, however, is that in stating this criterion he tacitly assumes certain things to be self-evidently true. He takes for granted that there is such a thing as truth, for example, and that language can express it. He must presuppose these things to carry on a rational argument. And to that extent, he is not free to doubt everything.

Even when he proposes, as Bacon did, a provisional criterion, suggesting in the preface to the Meditationes that his readers suspend their judgment until they have completed reading the work, he does not ask them to surrender their rational powers. On the contrary, Descartes presumes that these rational powers are fully engaged. He can appeal to the rationality of his readers on the grounds that they have already acquired a certain common sense. This common sense is the bequest, we can say, of tradition. It is a paradox that Descartes, who intended his meditations as a means to free his readers from prejudice, states in the preface that only those who are already free from prejudice will be able to follow his argument. He is asking, in fact, not for a prejudice-free reader, but rather for one with the right prejudices. The ideal reader is the one who stands in the rationalist tradition within which Descartes is at home.

Descartes' deficient understanding of tradition is apparent in the unyielding opposition he erects between authority and reason. His idea of method does not claim for itself any authority, but insists only on its reasonableness. It reflects the fundamental presupposition of the Enlightenment, writes Gadamer, "according to which a methodologically disciplined use of reason can safeguard us from all error."<sup>33</sup> The key

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<sup>31</sup> As Jankowitz (p. 28) writes, "Wenn alles bezweifelt wird, ist unbezweifelbar, dass alles bezweifelt wird."

<sup>32</sup> Jankowitz, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> "Was zunächst die Einteilung der Vorurteile in solche der Autorität und der Übereilung betrifft, so liegt dieser Einteilung offenbar die Grundvoraussetzung der Aufklärung zugrunde, derzufolge ein methodisch disziplinierter Gebrauch der Vernunft

word is “disciplined.” Reason is the implicit disciple or pupil of method, according to the Enlightenment view, and learns from its master how error can be avoided. Although it appears as if method were an impersonal procedure, demanding of reason allegiance to nothing other than its unbiased self, Gadamer rightly implies that method exerts its own authority. Its authority consists in its ability to purify the reason of a certain kind of prejudice. It is a justified authority, but an authority nevertheless, and so gives the lie to an absolute opposition between authority and reason. Within a certain rationalist tradition of what constitutes reasonable thought, a scientific method acquires authority as an aid to investigation. Descartes failed to acknowledge the authority of his rationalist milieu, nor that with which he invested his method. He could not see it because such authority, like that of a tradition or worldview, is self-evident and thus in large part invisible.

It cannot be denied, as Gadamer notes, that the scientific method which Descartes developed never wholly renounced the Greek insight that the knowing subject belongs, in a sense, to the object of knowledge.<sup>34</sup> Evidence of this can even be drawn from Descartes’ own work. Although the sense perceptions of the body are subordinate in the Meditations to the indubitable intuitions of the mind, for example, nevertheless the two belong to each other, inasmuch as both rely upon an independent God in whom their existence is conditional.<sup>35</sup> The human being can study metaphysical questions, and so gain an authentic independence from the misleading evidence of the senses. But at the same time, that person’s autonomy is contingent upon the body to which it was united at creation, and thus contingent upon the author of that creation. There is a dialectic here of part and whole which suggests Descartes’ relation to the classical heritage of which Gadamer speaks. The part which Descartes examines, the part which is himself and his subjective certainty, is united in a whole which depends upon God.

The concept of mathematics can also exemplify this dialectic. There is a mathematical dialectic – the representation of the world (that which is alien to and other than the mathematician) in symbols (which are not alien, because they are the mathematician’s own) for the purpose of reconciling the self to what is wholly other – a

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vor jeglichem Irrtum zu bewahren vermag.” Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 261 (trans.: p. 246).

Gadamer traces this division of prejudice into overhastiness and authority back to Christian Thomasius’ Lectiones de praeiudiciis (1689/1690) and to Johann Georg Walch’s article on prejudice in his Philosophisches Lexikon of 1726.

<sup>34</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 435 (trans.: p. 417).

<sup>35</sup> Keeling, p. 129n. A further example of this is offered by Keeling (p. 219) in his discussion of that Cartesian existence which is both dependent and independent: “Of those existents that are the least dependent (all matter and each self) none depends on any other, each is so far independent; yet each does depend on God and so is dependent.”

dialectic which Descartes never extended to tradition. He never grasped tradition's two poles. These poles are, on the one hand, the diversity of the past which remains forever alien, and on the other hand, the unity of history in which the contemporary person is bound to all that which went before. Tradition, that object of suspicion which nevertheless lies as close as one's own memory, had no systematic place in Descartes' thought. Yet it must be recalled that he did hesitate, as we saw, to tamper with some aspects of tradition. Descartes always stood upon the tradition of morals received from Stoic thought and Roman law. He avoided the subjection of the moral order to systematic doubt, refusing to bring a systematic moral doctrine into accord with reason. In this respect he betrayed a certain inconsistency.

It might even be said that he failed to perform a task which the spirit of the Age of Reason demanded. This task fell to Immanuel Kant. Kant took upon himself the task of uniting the moral sphere of practical reason with that of pure reason. In so doing, he drew attention to that common or communal sense which is fostered by the traditions of a community. But common sense, in Kant's third critique as well as in his moral philosophy, is viewed only as a preparation for the refinement of humanity's higher faculties. Whether this does justice to common sense and the tradition which underlies it – a complex which is central to the problem of morality and reason – is a question we must now raise.

### II.3. Kant and the Neglect of Communal Sense

The difficulties of harmonizing morality with reason were perceived by many of the thinkers between Descartes and Kant. The *bon mot* of Blaise Pascal, “Le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point,” succinctly expresses the problem.<sup>36</sup> Pascal distinguished between the “esprit de la géométrie,” whose principles are reasonable but remote from ordinary usage, and the “esprit de la finesse,” whose principles are in ordinary usage, but “so intricate and numerous that it is impossible not to miss some.”<sup>37</sup> The subtlety of the heart and its “esprit,” he realized, poses almost insurmountable problems to the reason which would grasp it. David Hume, to give another example, saw even more profoundly than Pascal the obstacles to a unification of reason and morality. His insight was based not upon an opposition between the two, but rather upon the inability of reason to ground itself in an absolute way. Unlike the antecedent skepticism of Descartes, Hume's skepticism was consequent. He saw that philosophical convictions

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<sup>36</sup> Blaise Pascal, Pensées, ed. Leon Brunschvicg (Paris: Hachette, 1897), no. 277; according to the edition of Louis Lafuma (Paris: Delmas, 1952), no. 423. English translation: Pensées, trans. with an introduction by A.J. Krailsheimer (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1966), no. 423.

<sup>37</sup> “Les principes sont si déliés et en si grand nombre qu'il est presque impossible qu'il n'en échappe.” Ibid., no. 1 (Brunschvicg edition) or no. 512 (Lafuma and Krailsheimer editions).

rest upon taste, sentiment, and feeling,<sup>38</sup> and went so far as to say that “all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv’d from nothing but custom.”<sup>39</sup> One cannot free oneself from custom, or the presuppositions bequeathed by the past. The difficulty of grounding a rational morality lay, in Hume’s opinion, not in the delicacy of the moral law but in the human bondage to custom or tradition. Every rational attempt to find ultimate foundations for knowledge encounters the skeptic’s caveat that custom shapes our idea of what reason is.

Kant, who was born in 1724, thirteen years after Hume’s birth date, and lived until 1804, twenty-eight years after Hume’s death, took the Scotsman’s objections to heart. He limited the claims of rationalism, as Gadamer notes, to the a priori element in the knowledge of nature.<sup>40</sup> In other words, pure reason’s sole concern is the cognitive faculties, as one reads in the Kantian critique, and pure reason determines that only the faculty of understanding (rather than reason and judgment) can prescribe a law to nature. It does so a priori, offering principles of knowledge from roots of its own. Only to these principles offered by the understanding, reasoned Kant, do the claims of a strict rationalism extend. Thus far the Kantian critique responded sympathetically to Hume’s objections. But Kant’s moral philosophy, as Gadamer writes, was developed in opposition to the doctrine of moral feeling propounded by the English-speaking philosophers.<sup>41</sup>

Writers such as Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), and Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), whose moral theory was appropriated by Hume, made the concept of a *sensus communis* central to their thought. Kant, by contrast, no longer grants a systematic or logical place to the idea of communal sense. This was significant for Kant’s moral philosophy, as Gadamer shows at the end of his brief discussion of the humanistic concept of judgment, and we shall expand that compressed, passage to bring out the consequences of the Kantian treatment of common sense for the decline of tradition.

### II.3.A. Against the Empiricism of Feeling

The problem with the English philosophers’ concept of moral feeling was, for Kant, its contingent and relative quality. Feeling lacks the unconditional universality of

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<sup>38</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, reprinted from the original edition in three volumes [under a single cover], and edited, with an analytical index, by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1888), Book I, part iii, section 8 (“Of the Causes of Belief”).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, I. iv.1, “Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason.”

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 260 (trans.: p. 245).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29 (trans.: p. 31).

moral law. One glimpses the kind of objection which Kant would make when one reads Hume's discussion of the causes of belief:

When I am convinc'd of any principle, 'tis only an idea, which strikes more strongly upon me. When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence.<sup>42</sup>

The "principle" which Hume refers to as "only an idea" would not deserve to be called a principle, in Kant's opinion, and would hardly be worthy of personal conviction. To be sure, Hume is not here discussing moral theory. There is no hint in this passage of the common life and traditions of society which save Hume's notion of feeling from being identified with caprice. But here one does see the contingency implicit in the idea of feeling which would trouble Kant. He would never give preference to one set of arguments over another, as Hume implies that he himself does, on the basis of feeling.

What Kant objects to here is feeling's reliance upon empiricism, a word which has two meanings. On the one hand, feeling is empirical in the sense of being directly experienced. Those who base morality on feeling prefer the empirical factuality of a feeling about the goodness or badness of a practice to a theory of moral law. On the other hand, however, feeling is empirical because it disregards philosophical considerations. In this sense, the word empirical recalls the ancient sect of physicians, the *εμπειρική αγωγή*, who based their practice on direct experience without regard for theory and the rules of accepted practice.<sup>43</sup> The word "empirical" suggests a skeptical attitude toward the laws and rules of morality. The empiricist, by consequence, accepts the testimony of immediate experience and distrusts tradition and its laws. To this approach Kant opposed his "typic of judgment." The typic of judgment "guards against the empiricism of practical reason, which bases the practical concepts of good and evil merely upon empirical consequences (on so-called happiness)."<sup>44</sup> The properties of good and evil cannot be simply determined by what makes one happy. It is as unjust to reduce them to a succession of experiences – even to the feelings of a community – as it is to

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<sup>42</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I. iii. 8.

<sup>43</sup> This sect, which flourished in Alexandria in the third century before Christ, was probably founded by Philinos of Cos. See the article "Medizin--Antike" by H. Diller in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co., 1980), vol. 5, columns 968-976.

<sup>44</sup> "Diese also als Typik der Urtheilskraft bewahrt vor dem Empirism der praktischen Vernunft, der die praktischen Begriffe des Guten und Bösen blos in Erfahrungsfolgen (der sogenannten Glückseligkeit) setzt. . . ." Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, in *Kant's Werke*, 5:70. *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, trans. and ed. with an introduction by Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), Bk. I, chap. ii, p. 179.

deafen oneself, in the rigid application of law, to the opinions of others. One must attend to both the particular case and to the universal law. The Kantian typic of judgment describes how the faculty of judgment applies the law to the human will, that is, how it subsumes the particular under the universal. In this way, it defends the pure reason from practical reason's empiricism.<sup>45</sup>

This is of significance for the concept of tradition. When Kant speaks of the unconditionality of the moral law (in contrast to the empiricism of feeling), he does not mean that one must be insensitive when judging others. On the contrary, one must "detach oneself from the subjective private conditions of one's own judgment," as Gadamer writes, and "shift one's ground to the standpoint of the other person"<sup>46</sup> The development of a genuine morality, in short, presents a dual task. It asks, first of all, that one adhere to the strict moral law, accepting it as one's own. But it also asks, secondly, that one stand apart from oneself, as it were, in order to consider the position of the one who is judged. Kant broaches this issue in the brief second part of the Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. There he recommends that educators search ancient and modern biographies for examples of the duties which they would like their pupils to learn. The pupils would then grow to esteem worthy actions and despise the unworthy, and to exercise their judgment.<sup>47</sup> Thus although Kant defines the law of pure practical reason without reference to a creed or to a specific tradition, he nevertheless intends to develop that reason by the study of the common tradition of literature. Kant "relies on ordinary human reason," as Gadamer says, "and desires to cultivate and form practical judgment."<sup>48</sup> He seems to acknowledge that one gains a proper moral sense not in isolation from the ethos of the past, but in conjunction with it. The formation of pure practical reason includes the handing-on of traditional moral doctrines from teacher to pupil.

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<sup>45</sup> The typic also defends moral philosophy from those who would reduce it to a mere exercise of pure reason. Kant emphasized with his "metaphysic" of morals that, however autonomous the practical reason, the basis of moral philosophy can never be reduced to a technique, a program, or a system. See Gadamer's "Kant und die philosophische Hermeneutik," in Kleine Schriften, vol IV: Variationen, pp. 196-204.

<sup>46</sup> "Vielmehr ist es sittlich geboten, von den subjektiven Bedingungen des eigenen Urteils zu abstrahieren und sich in den Standpunkt des anderen zu versetzen." Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 30 (trans.: p. 31).

<sup>47</sup> Kant, Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, in Kant's Werke, 5:154 (translation: p. 252).

<sup>48</sup> "Für diese Aufgabe [der Gründung und Kulture echter moralischen Gesinnungen] beruft er sich in der Tat auf die gemeine Menschenvernunft und will die praktische Urteilskraft üben und bilden." Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 30 (translation: p. 32). The English expression "ordinary human reason" misses the emphasis in the German on the communality of that faculty – its relation to common sense.

### II.3.B. The Impoverishment of the *Sensus Communis*

But this tradition does not belong to the essence of pure practical reason. Such reason gives a law to itself, rather than taking it over from another source. Its center is the individual, rather than the community. Although the community plays a part, in that one must be flexible in judging other members of a common social order, and in that one cultivates a pure practical reason under the tutelage of the community's traditions, nevertheless no communal feeling or sensitivity can form the basis of a genuine moral judgment. For this reason Gadamer asserts that the *sensus communis* has no systematic place in Kant's moral philosophy.<sup>49</sup> The sensitivity or moral feeling of the community does not shape, in the Kantian critique, the self-legislation of pure practical reason.

Moreover, the idea of common sense has in Kant's moral philosophy no logical place.<sup>50</sup> This becomes clear in his treatment of the concept of transcendental judgment. There he distinguishes between general logic, which abstracts from all content of knowledge, and judgment, whose task is to subsume the content of knowledge under the rules which logic gives. It is a question of what a community can and cannot impart. Kant expressed it this way: "though understanding is capable of being instructed [by logic], and of being equipped with rules, judgment is a peculiar talent which can be practised only, and cannot be taught."<sup>51</sup> Understanding differs from judgment, just as the possession of right knowledge differs from the correct employment of it. A physician or judge may have a complete grasp of procedure, without being able to apply it wisely. Judgment performs the task essential to application, the task of fitting the general rule to the particular case. This is the logical place of judgment. In Kant's critique, however, this faculty of judgment cannot be taught. It is without a doubt that the judgment of taste can be communicated,<sup>52</sup> but examples of tasteful judgment cannot supply the lack of the faculty of judgment. Although the judgment of taste certainly presupposes common sense<sup>53</sup> – Kant, in fact, claims in the third critique that they can be equated<sup>54</sup> –

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 29 (trans.: p. 31).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 30 (trans.: p. 32).

<sup>51</sup> "[U]nd so zeigt sich, dass zwar der Verstand einer Belehrung und Ausrliftung durch Regeln fähig, Urtheilskraft aber ein besonderes Talent sei, welches gar nicht belehrt, sondern nur geübt sein will." Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft, 2. Auflage (1787), in Kant's Werke, 3:131. Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd.; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1958), first division, bk. II, "Introduction: Transcendental Judgment in General," p. 177 (first German edition of the Kritik, p. 133; second edition, p. 172).

<sup>52</sup> Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, first part, section 39.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., section 20.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., section 40.

nevertheless the idea of common sense remains for him merely the common possession of all human beings, cultivated and uncultivated alike. It provides the basis for universal communication, but contributes nothing to the content of what is communicated. Unlike the more exclusive faculty of judgment, which only some possess, common sense is the inheritance of all, and has no place in Kant's formal logic.

This doctrine, it can be said, contributed to the decline of tradition. There are two aspects to the decline. First, the Kantian critique neglected the centuries-old development of *sensus communis*. This concept embraces a variety of aspects, from Socrates' criticism of learned dogmatism to Vico's rhetorical interest in the probable and the persuasive (as distinct from the mathematically certain). Common sense is the classical counter-concept to all theoretical ideals of life. In their place it substitutes the practical adjustment of the moral end to the situation at hand. Gadamer emphasizes this aspect in his discussion of common sense. He defines it as "the sense of the right and the general good that is to be found in all men, moreover, a sense that is acquired through living in the community and is determined by its structures and aims."<sup>55</sup> Those structures and aims resist any full explication within a legal code or constitution. They develop over time, and are the expression of tradition. There is a reciprocal relationship here. Common sense, on the one hand, allows the development of life in community; and the community's traditions, on the other hand, foster common sense. Kant's neglect of this venerable concept blinded him to the role of tradition in the refinement of the faculty of judgment.

The second aspect of the decline of tradition, to which Kant's virtual exclusion of common sense from his philosophy contributed, is the reduction of that common sense to a mere condition for acquiring the higher faculties of cognition. Because everyone possesses this common sense, argues Kant, it confers neither credit nor distinction.<sup>56</sup> "The only significance of this sound understanding is," according to Gadamer's paraphrase of Kant, "that it is a preliminary stage of the cultivated and enlightened reason."<sup>57</sup> One presupposes it as a condition for acquiring knowledge, just as education in the humanities is presupposed in the cultivating of good taste.<sup>58</sup> Thus in the Kantian critique, both common sense (for moral philosophy) and the humanities (for aesthetic

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<sup>55</sup> "Ein Sinn für das Rechte und das gemeine Wohl, der in allen Menschen lebt, ja mehr noch ein Sinn, der durch die Gemeinsamkeit des Lebens erworben, durch seine Ordnungen und Zwecke bestimmt wird." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 19 (trans.: p. 22). Gadamer refers here to Giambattista Vico's *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (1709).

<sup>56</sup> Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, first part, section 40.

<sup>57</sup> "Solcher gesunde Verstand hat keine andere Bedeutung als die, Vorstufe des ausgebildeten und aufgeklärten Verstandes zu sein." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 31 (trans.: p. 32).

<sup>58</sup> Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, first part, section 60.

judgment) share a common fate. Both are relegated to mere preliminary steps from which one must climb to the higher faculties. This relegation impoverishes the concept of tradition in which the two participate. Insofar as tradition provides the seedbed for both common sense and a humanistic education, the pruning-back of their role hinders our understanding of the productive value of tradition.

It must be conceded that, in the Kritik der Urteilskraft, the *sensus communis* and the judgment of taste are united and treated at some length. Taste is the true common sense, and enables one to estimate what makes a feeling or judgment universally communicable.<sup>59</sup> But Kant's new definition of these concepts neglected some of the most important features classically ascribed to them. We saw, in the introductory section above entitled "Kant's Severing of Judgment from Knowledge," how the Kantian critique defined judgment as a transcendental faculty. It transcends the particular items which it orders, contributing nothing to our knowledge of them. Something of the same can be concluded from our discussion of the communal sense. Although it enables the universal communication of a judgment of taste, it is only preliminary to the enlightened reason, and prescribes no theoretical concept as to what good taste ought to be. Here common sense is uprooted from the idea of a community and its historical life. Hence the third critique constituted a turning point. "It was the end of a tradition, but also the beginning of a new development," as Gadamer writes. "It limited the idea of taste to an area in which, as a special principle of judgment, it could claim independent validity – and, by so doing, limited the concept of knowledge to the theoretical and practical use of reason."<sup>60</sup> The independent validity of the idea of taste was due to the transcendental nature of the faculty of judgment. The limited concept of knowledge reflects the diminished role of common sense. From one perspective, this development was necessary for Kant to adequately treat the two poles of the concept of taste, namely, its subjectivity and its universality.<sup>61</sup> He had to show how individual tastes can differ, while good taste remains

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., section 40.

<sup>60</sup> "Sie bedeutet den Abbruch einer Tradition, aber zugleich die Einleitung einer neuen Entwicklung: sie hat den Begriff des Geschmacks auf das Feld eingeschränkt, auf dem er als ein eigenes Prinzip der Urteilskraft selbständige und unabhängige Geltung beanspruchen konnte – und engte umgekehrt damit den Begriff der Erkenntnis auf den theoretischen und praktischen Vernunftgebrauch ein." Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 37 (trans.: p. 38). The English leaves untranslated the adjective "selbständige" which might be rendered as "autonomous." This is important, because Gadamer argues that the autonomy of aesthetic judgment divorced art from the question of truth.

<sup>61</sup> "If he is both to raise and to solve the problem of taste, Kant must first provide an analysis of the judgment of taste which shows its essential connection to feeling, but then discover an explanation of aesthetic response which, while treating it as a feeling – retaining its essential subjectivity – nevertheless allows its intersubjective validity." Paul Guyer, Kant and the Claims of Taste (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 4.

unchanging. But from another perspective, his brook with the past characterizes the Enlightenment's glorification of reason at the expense of tradition. The final stages of tradition's decline were marked by the rise of historicism, ushered in by aesthetic consciousness and romantic hermeneutics. These two concepts, which can be traced back to their Enlightenment origins, shaped the nineteenth century's concept of history. But the question arises: to what degree does historicism, which can be seen as the assessment of history without reference to the metaphysical tradition, properly characterize the understanding of history? It is to this question that we now turn.